POLITICAL FEATURE NO. 1-0168 FEBRUARY 13, 1976
RUSSEL SPLANE/MIAMI

CARIBBEAN INDEPENDENCE: PART 1
(ANTIGUA)

INTRO:

AT LEAST THREE BRITISH COLONIES IN THE CARIBBEAN -- STILL LINKED TO BRITAIN AS ASSOCIATED STATES -- HAVE ANNOUNCED THEY'LL SEEK COMPLETE INDEPENDENCE THIS YEAR. THEY ARE ST. KITTS-NEVIS, ANTIGUA, AND ST. LUCIA. VOA CORRESPONDENT RUSSELL SPLANE IN MIAMI RECENTLY FLEW OUT TO THE LESSER ANTILLES AND VISITED TWO OF THESE ISLANDS -- ANTIGUA AND ST. LUCIA. IN THIS (THE FIRST OF TWO) REPORT(S), HE LOOKS AT THE INDEPENDENCE MOVEMENT IN ANTIGUA.

NARR:

INDEPENDENCE -- THAT MAGIC STATE HAS FIRED MEN'S MINDS, FUELED NATIONALIST MOVEMENTS AND TRIGGERED REVOLUTIONS SINCE THE BEGINNING OF TIME -- IS EMERGING AS A BURGEONING NEW FORCE ON THE ISLAND OF ANTIGUA IN THE LEEWARD ISLANDS OF THE CARBBEAN. BUT RATHER THAN AN IDEOLOGICAL NIRVANA DEVOUTLY WISHED BY ALL, INDEPEDENCE HAS BECOME A POLITICAL FOOTBALL THAT WILL BE A MAJOR ISSUE IN THE ISLAND'S FEBRUARY EIGHTEENTH ELECTION. THE FACT IS THAT BY NO MEANS ALL OF ANTIGUA'S SEVENTY THOUSAND PEOPLE THINK THE TIME IS RIPE FOR INDEPENDENCE. MANY QUESTION WHETHER THE ISLAND'S SHAKY ECONOMY IS VIABLE ENOUGH TO LET ANTIGUA GO IT ALONE. AND MANY ALSO QUESTION THE PROCEDURE THE GOVERNMENT IS FOLLOWING TO ACHIEVE ITS ANNOUNCED GOAL OF INDEPENDENCE.

I TALKED WITH A MEMBER OF PRIME MINISTER WALTER'S CABINET, MR. SYDNEY PRINCE WHO IS MINISTER OF FINANCE, INDUSTRY AND TOURISM. I ASKED HIM HOW THE GOVERNMENT CAN BE SURE THAT ANTIGUA, AND ITS PEOPLE, ARE READY FOR INDEPENDENCE:

TAPE: CUT ONE -- PRINCE

"WE HAVE BEEN DISCUSSING THE QUESTION OF INDEPEDENCE WITHIN OUR OWN PARTY AND THE MOVE TO INDEPEDENCE WAS SANCTIONED BY THE CONVENTION OF THE PARTY IN 1975. THE OPPOSITION PARTY HAS SAID THAT THEY AGREE WITH THE MOVE TO INDEPENDENCE SHOULD COME WHILE THEY ARE IN POWER. AS TO OUR READINESS FOR INDEPENDENCE WE THINK THAT ALL PEOPLE SHOULD BE INDEPENDENT. WE THINK THAT INDEPENDENCE IS A STATE THAT WE ARE READY FOR."

NARR:

THE OPPOSITION ANTIGUA LABOR PARTY WILL HOTLY CONTEST THE INDEPENDENCE ISSUE IN THE ELECTION. I ASKED SENATOR LESTER BIRD, CHAIRMAN OF THE ALP, ABOUT THE GOVERNMENT'S CLAIM THAT ANTIGUA IS READY FOR INDEPENDENCE:

TAPE: CUT TWO -- BIRD

"WE DO NOT AGREE. BASICALLY WHAT THE LABOR PARTY SAYS IS THAT WE CAN NOT BE AGAINST THE CONCEPT OF INDEPENDENCE SINCE EVERY HUMAN BEING HAS THE FEELING AND SHOULD HAVE THE CAPACITY FOR SELF-DETERMINATION. BUT WHAT WE ARE SAYING IS THAT THE ECONOMY OF THE ISLAND HAS BEEN SO DESTROYED IN THE LAST FIVE YEARS THAT THAT SHOULD BE OUR PRIORITY -- GETTING THE ECONOMY MOBILIZED AND GETTING THE ECONOMY FUNCTIONING AGAIN. WHEN WE HAVE A GOOD ECONOMIC UNDERPINNING AND BASE, WE WILL THEN HAVE A TAKE-OFF TOWARD OUR INDEPENDENCE. SO OUR POSITION IS THAT EVEN THOUGH WE AGREE ON THE CONCEPT OF INDEPENDENCE, WE THINK THE TIMING IS WRONG."

NARR:

THE ANTIGUA LABOR PARTY QUESTIONS THE GOVERNMENT'S CLAIM THAT ALL THE PEOPLE OF THE ISLAND WANT INDEPEDENCE NOW. MR. BIRD:

TAPE: CUT THREE -- BIRD

"ABOUT EIGHTEEN MONTHS AGO WHEN THE PREMIER FIRST RAISED THIS POINT WE DID A HOUSE-TO-HOUSE KIND OF A GALLUP POLL. EVEN AMONG THOSE SUPPORTERS WHO SUPPORTED THE GOVERNMENT, WHEN YOU ASKED THEM THE QUESTION ABOUT INDEPENDENCE THEY WOULD ANSWER YOU: 'WHAT INDEPENDENCE? ANTIGUA IS NOT YET READY FOR INDEPENDENCE.' I THINK THEY ARE TOO MUCH CONCERNED WITH BREAD AND BUTTER ISSUES, I THINK THEY ARE TOO MUCH CONCERNED WITH THE UNEMPLOYMENT SITUATION, I THINK THESE ARE THE THINGS THAT ARE UPPERMOST IN THEIR MINDS. WE WOULD PREFER TO GO BY REFERENDUM. WE BELIEVE THAT THE PEOPLE OF THIS COUNTRY MUST BE CONSULTED. WE DO NOT BELIEVE THAT WE HAVE THE RIGHT TO IMPOSE THESE THINGS UPON THE PEOPLE. WE SHOULD PUT IT TO THE PEOPLE AND LET THE PEOPLE DETERMINE WHETHER THEY THEMSELVES FEEL THAT THEY WISH TO GO INTO INDEPENDENCE. THAT IS OUR POSITION."

NARR:

THE ANTIGUA LABOR PARTY IS CONVINCED THAT ITS ARGUMENTS AGAINST INDEPENDENCE NOW WILL PREVAIL IN THE UPCOMING ELECTION. THE PROGRESSIVE LABOR MOVEMENT IS EQUALLY DETERMINED TO PRESS AHEAD WITH ITS PLANS TO USE WHAT MANY CALL THE "BACK DOOR" APPROACH TO INDEPENDENCE -- ASKING BRITAIN TO EXERCISE ITS OPTION BY SEVERING THE ASSOCIATION TIES. WITH ALL THIS OPTION BY SEVERING THE ASSOCIATION TIES. WITH ALL THIS POLITICAL TUG-OF-WAR, WHAT ABOUT THE MAN-IN-THE-STREET IN ANTIGUA? IF THE GOVERNMENT DOES ACHIEVE INDEPENDENCE, WHAT WILL IT MEAN TO THE ORDINARY CITIZEN? MISTER PRINCE:

TAPE: CUT FOUR -- PRINCE

"IMMEDIATELY, I DO NOT THINK THERE WILLL BE ANY MARKED CHANGE. BUT IN COURSE OF TIME, AS WE ARE ABLE TO NEGOTIATE FOR ECONOMIC BENEFITS WITH COUNTRIES WHO ARE NEIGHBORING -- INCLUDING YOUR COUNTRY -- I THINK THAT THE MAN IN THE STREET WILL BEGIN TO SEE THE DIFFERENCE IN THE WAY WE CAN MOUNT INITIATIVES AND BRING THEM TO PASS. PEOPLE WILL BEGIN TO LOOK AT THEIR HOMELAND

DIFFERENTLY, BEGIN TO PARTICIPATE IN NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT, BEGIN TO PARTICIPATE IN ALL THE ASPECTS OF LIFE, BECAUSE THEY WILL BE, IN FACT, CITIZENS OF A NEW-BORN STATE."

NARR:

YOU'VE BEEN LISTENING TO THE PROS AND CONS -- FROM A GOVERNMENT SPOKESMAN AND FROM THE CHAIRMAN OF THE OPPOSITION LABOR PARTY -- DEBATING THE QUESTION OF INDEPENDENCE FOR THE BRITISH ASSOCIATED STATE OF ANTIGUA IN THE CARIBBEAN.

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